MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

FILM AND MEDIA CULTURE

MAY 2024

RECENT EVENTS RECAP

I Saw the TV Glow Screening — April 18th

The Hirschfield Student Programmers organized a screening of the film *I Saw The TV Glow* as a stress-buster event. In the film, Teenager Owen is just trying to make it through life in the suburbs when his classmate introduces him to a mysterious late-night TV show — a vision of a supernatural world beneath their own. In the pale glow of the television, Owen's view of reality begins to crack.

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MAMBAR PIERRETTE — May 2nd

Thank you to everyone who joined us for February's Hirschfield International Film Series screening of MAMBAR PIERRETTE. In the film, a free-spirited seamstress navigates poverty and patriarchy in the Cameroonian city of Douala.

Advanced Filmmaking Screening — May 13th

Students in the Advanced Filmmaking class screened their final projects. Congratulations to Aylin Atzin, Graydon Hanson, Mathieu Houlier, Kalani Martial, Lauren Sayula, and Max Walters (in collaboration with Daniela Garcia) on phenomenal films, and thank you to everyone who helped make these films possible!

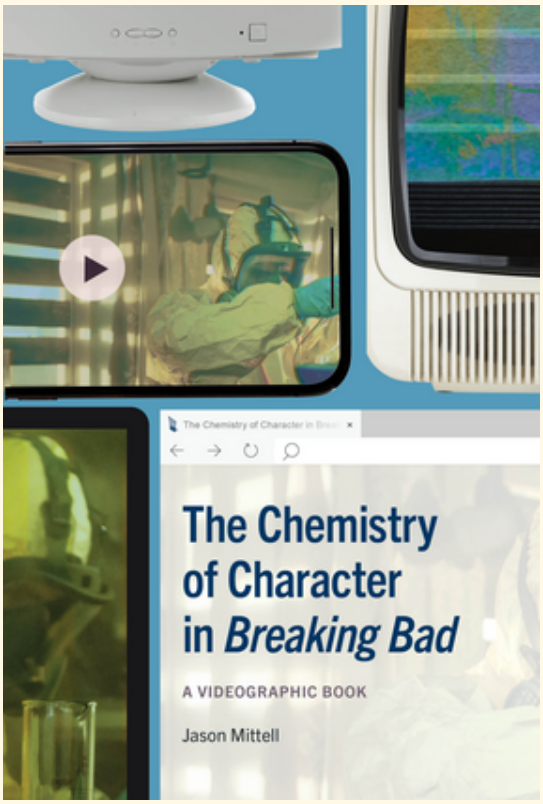
THANK YOU to all of our wonderful faculty, staff, and students for an amazing spring semester! We hope you all have a fantastic summer and we can't wait to see you in the fall.

CONGRATULATIONS to our seniors! We can't wait to see all of the amazing work you go on to do in the future!

The Chemistry of Character in *Breaking Bad*

by Jason Mittell

FMMC Professor Jason Mittell recently released a new videographic book titled, *The Chemistry of a Character in Breaking Bad*. The multimedia, open-access project explores the landmark American television series Breaking Bad (2008–13) via the emerging format of videographic criticism. Featuring a collection of open-access video essays, this "videographic book" aims to interpret the particular modes of characterization within the series and discusses the significance of character as an aspect of media storytelling. Read on for more details and an interview with Professor Mittell!



Click Here to Read the Book!

What is a videographic book?

We've had video essays for quite a while in the academic world and they've become more and more prominent over the past decade-honestly largely due to what's happening at Middlebury. Both Chris Keathley and I have been really active in this world. We co-founded a journal and run summer workshops to teach people how to do this and it's been very exciting. Now, a video essay can be published in a number of journals, and it functions a lot like a journal article. So, I started to think a few years ago, well what's the equivalent for a book? How could you write a longer-form project using videos in this way? And, again, in this format, the videos aren't merely illustrations of your ideas, but rather it's where the arguments and the analysis happen within the video. So, I worked with Lever Press, which is a sort of a digital open-access press that emerges out of liberal arts colleges, including Middlebury, and I came up with a model for a videographic book that uses an ebook reader, and within that ebook reader, there are embedded videos. So, there's regular text, there can be still images, and then videos that you can click on and play within the book itself. This is the first one that I made and it's not the only way to do it, but the way that I do it is that each chapter has at least one video where that video is the sort of centerpiece of the ideas and then some written text that is complementing and contextualizing the video.

Jason Mittell has been a Professor of Film & Media Culture at Middlebury College for 22 years. He has published seven books on American television, narrative theory, and videographic criticism.

interview with JASON MITTELL

What can a videographic book do for film critique that a typical book couldn't?

One of the biggest challenges of film and media studies since its inception has been that you have to spend a lot of time describing what you're talking about. If you think about literary studies, the quotation is a very powerful tool. If you're talking about a poem, a play, or a novel, you can quote a section to reproduce exactly what you're analyzing using the same medium, words. Before the rise of video essays, we couldn't do that. Video essays allow you to quote from films and television shows, use the footage, take the power of the footage and harness the meanings of the footage, and do so in a way that makes the analysis a lot more tangible and material for readers/viewers (we don't have a term for that).

The videos themselves also create a kind of aesthetic response, right? When you're watching a good video, it's not just like you're watching a lecture about the film, but rather you are experiencing something through the harnessing of sounds and images, and that's really powerful. For me, and a lot of people who do this work, it allows you to talk about things that are much harder to talk about in writing. For instance, the entire book is about characters in Breaking Bad, how Breaking Bad constructs characters, and how characterization works. One of the videos is specifically about sound and the way that sound is used to create a sense of a certain character. That's really hard to write about, right? There are moments where I'm presenting how the way he sighs and the way he experiences silence is part of his characterization, which, I mean, you could describe that but unless you know the show really well, you're not gonna fully understand that. That, to me, is the great power of the form is that you're able to convey to people even if they don't know the show particularly well or haven't seen it at all you're able to convey this is how it works on this show.

Would you say this form makes film critique more accessible to the general public?

It can, right? In one way, it makes it accessible because it's a free online book, right? So, that's that's one form of access. Another form of access is that if you are unfamiliar with the subject matter, you can familiarize yourself as you're consuming the argument. This is really important, especially for writing about or analyzing more obscure works. If you are writing about an African film that wasn't distributed in the U.S. you can actually, if you have the footage, go ahead and convey something about why this film is interesting because you're showing it, right? So, that's hugely powerful to allow that form of access. I presume most of the people who are going to read my book know Breaking Bad since it's one of the more popular shows of the 21st century, but as you're watching a video, you can remember these moments and it evokes the sensations of those moments rather than just like when you're reading about it where they're like, "oh yeah I kind of remember that." It becomes a lot more tangible so it allows for a kind of rhetoric that is more accessible to non-specialists.

I will say some video essays, including a couple of mine in this book, have a more experimental, exploratory tone, so I wouldn't quite call them accessible necessarily because they are designed to be somewhat challenging to watch and to make sense of.

interview with JASON MITTELL

When you're compiling this book, you're taking clips and things from the shows and films, so how is it maybe more challenging in some ways to write this because of copyright, licensing, and the legality of using other people's work?

The good thing is that US copyright law has this provision called fair use, which allows you to, without permission, reuse copyrighted material for purposes of critique and commentary, and that's what I'm doing. That's what our entire field is doing. So, we don't license material and we don't ask permission because we don't need to. Going back to the idea of the quotation if you're a literary scholar and you're quoting a novel, you don't ask permission to quote that novel. That is considered fair use, and quoting Breaking Bad is the same thing in that way.

What can readers/viewers expect when they open the book up?

The concept behind the book is that one of the primary ways that television tells stories is by creating long-term characterization. One of the big differences between television and film is that you're spending hours and hours with these people. With serial television, you're spending years with them over time because every week you go back for a new episode and then you wait for the next season. Even if you're binging the whole thing, Breaking Bad is like 60 hours. I don't know how fast you can watch that if you have a life. So, part of the idea is that you're spending time with these characters and the thing I'm really interested in academically is how television uses characterization to sort of tell stories and create responses. Breaking Bad, in my view, is one of the most successful shows in terms of creating compelling characters and doing interesting things with those characters. It's one of the only television shows that focuses on characters changing over time. Most TV shows traditionally have characters established and they're pretty stable throughout the run of the series. Their situations may change, but who they are is very stable, whereas Breaking Bad is very much about people transforming over time.

In this book, each chapter is self-contained. There's not a through line that you need to follow from Chapter 1 to 2 to 3 to 4, but rather, you can dive into any chapter and explore an aspect of characterization. Some chapters are more are focused on individual characters, whereas other ones are more about concepts. For example, there's one chapter that's about character relationships and how television conveys a relationship. Another one is about a specific character and fans' relationship to that character. Another one is about how the show introduces new characters late in the series. They all have different questions that each chapter is trying to answer. I kind of anticipate that people aren't gonna read it cover to cover. Going from Chapter 1 to 13 is not essential, but rather, that people will sort of explore the book. Maybe they'll seek out the characters they are most interested in, or maybe investigate the questions that they're really focused on.

interview with JASON MITTELL

How can the book be used in the classroom?

I mean I'm not gonna assign it like a textbook, necessarily, but I will definitely use it. Next fall, I'm teaching a class called Videographic Film and Media Studies, in which I teach students how to make video essays so I will certainly link to the book and say, "You can feel free to peruse this," and you know I may assign one of the chapters, and then we'll talk about it in class. It will be less about like, "Wow is this so great" and more about like, "How did I make this, and what were the choices that I made," so that students can sort of learn the process of making them.

What went into making this book?

I started this project in 2018 when I had the idea of doing a long-form project about Breaking Bad. I made one video in 2018 as a test case, and then I was on leave for a year. I spent a fair amount of time working on the project and rewatching the series in a video editor so that I could choose the clips I wanted to use and organize them. I made about half of the videos during that year and then was planning on finishing up the next year. Then, COVID hit, and put it on pause for about a year and a half because I had other things on my mind. In the spring of 2022, I had another semester of leave, and I was very fortunate I got a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship that was focused on this project, so I spent that semester finishing it up. I finished all the videos over that semester and then wrote the written material to contextualize the videos. There are about 11,000 words, and then the videos themselves, which are at least four hours in total. Then, I started assembling it, sent it to the press, and sort of worked with them to develop the back end of how this is gonna look, making captions and transcripts.

This is the first book like this. Are there plans for more videographic books?

So, this is part of a book series, and I'm the series editor. In a book series, there is typically some sort of theme that unites it, whether that's a topic or theoretical approach. This videographic book series is through Lever Press, and I made the first one so that I could understand the back-end process and optimize the systems to publish it. We have four other books that other authors are devising for the series, and one of the nice things is that they're all very different in scope and approach. One is all about 21st-century science fiction films. Another is about the use of classical music in 1950s American television, doing case studies on Leonard Bernstein and a couple of other people. Those are very different projects, and we want the series to embrace a lot of different approaches and a lot of different objects of study. My hope is that my book is going to appeal to a certain type of person who likes Breaking Bad and is invested in characterization and narrative theory, but the other book on 1950s classical music on TV is going to appeal to musicologists and television historians, and people who are interested in very different things are going to think, "Wow, this is a cool book, how does this work," and maybe look at some of the other ones, and look at the series as a whole, so they can appreciate and engage with some of the ideas differently.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.